

TRANSCRIPT

Why Pure Hockey's relocation near the New England Sports Center is a big win

Podcast interview with Jeff Copetas, Vice President of Marketing and E-Commerce for Pure Hockey; and Janelle Kozyra, member of Kimco Realty's blogging team

Janelle: Hello everyone, I am Janelle Kozyra, a member of Kimco Realty's blogging team. Today I have with us one of Kimco's tenants, Jeff Copetas, who is the VP of Marketing and E-Commerce for Pure Hockey, which is located in Massachusetts.

They actually just moved out of their Berlin, Mass., location into a new location in Marlborough in a Kimco shopping center. So that's why we're here today to talk about the move and the recent opening. So, Jeff, it's great to have you with us.

Jeff: Thanks. Glad to be here.

Janelle: So your move into Marlborough, Mass., is a very strategic location, and now you're in the Shops at the Pond and you're right on Donald Lynch Boulevard. For folks out there who are not familiar with the area, that is right by the New England Sports Center, which is just about a few miles up the road from where you are. And that is the largest youth hockey facility in New England, which is important for you because you are a hockey provider.

So, I want to talk more about that in just a minute. But I want to start off with just getting our listeners a little more acquainted with Pure Hockey. So, give us a little bit of background on Pure Hockey and the merchandise that you sell there.

Jeff: We'll be going into our 20th year next year. We opened our first store in 1994, a little tiny shop up in Worcester, Mass., that is no longer there. But we have since opened 18 other stores, which is nice. Eight of which are in Massachusetts, a handful in New Hampshire. We have stores in Connecticut, New Jersey, Western Pennsylvania. And our most recent store opening was up in Buffalo, N.Y.

We sell, obviously, we're a very hockey-focused company, so we sell equipment for basically any player at any level of play. Anything from just getting started as a youth, to pro-level gear for the elite player. And we also, within all of our Pure Hockey stores, we usually dedicate a couple thousand square feet to lacrosse equipment, too. There's a lot of crossover between those two sports and so we have a store within a store as they call it.

Janelle: Tell us about why you decided to relocate your Berlin location to Marlborough.

Jeff: Well, there are a couple of reasons. One, you've already made some reference to, which is it did get us a little bit closer to the New England Sports Center, which is a six-rink facility a little bit down the road from where we are now. We previously were in Berlin, which is about a mile from the new location. We were another mile further away from that multiple-rink facility.

So, we had driven by that location where we are now, and thought that bears some investigation. We figure we'll probably get a little more visibility out of being on the same road. We weren't on the same road before, although we were still pretty close to the rink, we weren't on the same road.

So we do think that the passerby factor is going to help us when people are just simply driving by who may be coming to those rinks from out of town, and many do. They'll now see a big Pure Hockey sign right on the way to the rink, whereas before they didn't. I think the big reason was, of course, we're closer to that big facility of rinks.

And the second thing is, our old location in Berlin was a three-floor store, which had its complications in terms of moving product up and down stairs. We didn't really have a traditional receiving area or receiving dock, so that made getting product into that building a little bit difficult.

So by going to the new location where we are now, it's all concentrated on one floor. We have a traditional, normal receiving dock that makes it easy to get product in and out. So both logistically and strategically it was kind of a no-brainer for us.

Janelle: Did you have a grand opening for the new store?

Jeff: We opened the store a couple of weeks ago. We did what's called a soft opening, which is basically open the doors, let people know, as many as possible, that we moved the store. We did not have any major event there as part of it. Moving almost 30,000 square feet of inventory is obviously not an overnight endeavor. So, we thought it to be better to do a soft opening, let people know, let people come in, and get used to the store.

Then on Aug. 1 through 4, we are having a pretty large event there, which is our annual tent sale. You can save up to 75 percent off certain items and at least 20 percent off everything in the store. So that will be happening on Aug. 1 through 4, and we'll use that as sort of the grand opening for the new location.

Janelle: What went into moving all of your merchandise to the new location? I mean it wasn't far—like you said—it was about a mile away. But it's still a lot to move. So what was that like?

Jeff: It was really hot. We didn't have movers come. We didn't have any moving companies come and help us do it. We basically rounded up the troops, and we had people from the corporate office, from the warehouse, from other stores. Everybody basically went there at 5 o'clock and it turned out to be just basically a large assembly line.

There were folks stationed in Berlin filling trucks, and the truck would go over to the new location and there were people there waiting for it to unload it and get it on the shelves and just do the merchandising thing. So it was a long day. I think it was about 5 a.m. until about 9 p.m. before the last person left.

Janelle: Do you have a completely different layout to work with now or is it similar where you can kind of figure more easily, OK, this goes here, we want to put this there. Or has there been a lot of rethinking of the layout and where you're placing your merchandise?

Jeff: Yeah, one of the great things about the new location was that it sort of fits perfectly into the way we merchandise the store. It's an old Borders bookstore, so the way they had it set up was they had a cafeteria or café area in one section, and then they had a kids section in another area.

They were clearly differentiated from the rest of the store, and as it turns out, those two areas were perfect sizes for A, our lacrosse section, and B, our goalie section. So we do separate out our goalie equipment for hockey. So that was sort of serendipity. A beautiful thing. And both of those things ended up fitting just perfectly into those spots. You walk in there and you think, why didn't we do this two years ago?

Janelle: Great. And Jeff, one thing on your website that you have about Pure Hockey, it's on the about page—and there's lots of great information on the website—and there's one thing in particular that caught our attention.

It says, "Pure Hockey offers the best of both worlds: a robust Internet and e-commerce site, complete with all the information you need to purchase hockey equipment, and our physical stores, where you can go and talk face-to-face with our hockey experts. In the future, we'll try to integrate the two in many more interesting ways."

This has really been the toughest nut that a lot of brick-and-mortar retailers have been trying to crack lately, which is figuring out how to integrate the online and physical store experience, and how to not get run over by online retail, but rather use the Internet to complement and boost their business.

So, from your perspective at Pure Hockey, what are your thoughts on this and what have you sort of figured out in terms of using the Internet as a friend and not an enemy?

Jeff: Right, right. Well, we do have a pretty robust online business as well. That obviously serves the rest of the world outside of our retail locations that I mentioned at the beginning of our talk. There is an evolving strategy around how we sort of tie the two together.

You know, we have our store guides often, and sometimes we have corporate staff, do product review videos. If we get a product in, we'll have a store manager holding it up and telling the customer the features of the product and what they like about it.

So last year, we had a little initiative where we were putting QR codes on all of the products in the store. And if you scanned that QR code, it would go straight to the video for that product by one of our store managers or by one of our employees who plays the game and knows the gear and can help you understand what the features of that product are. So that's one way we've tried to sort of integrate the brick-and-mortar with the online.

Also on the web, we do a lot of product content in regards to how to best fit, for example, a pair of hockey shin pads, which seems easy at first glance, but there are actually a lot of factors going into that, such as if it's going to be rubbing up against your skate or your hockey pads. Is it too big, in judging how to properly fit a shin pad?

You have to also know going in how high your skate is and how low your pants go. And so we put videos up on our site and a lot of educational content all shot in our stores by store people about how to best fit or how to choose the right hockey stick for you.

There's a lot of terminology around sticks, like stick flex and stick curve and stick align, and basically, what does all that mean? And so we do put a lot of content on our website in regards to teaching our customers all of that stuff, and we get really good feedback on it as well.

So, those are just some of the ways. And then you know there's your sort of traditional retail versus online stuff. We're toying with ship-to-store type things, and we do offer free shipping out of any of our store kiosks. You know, that kind of stuff. So we're doing a lot of stuff to try and sort of meld the two together.

Janelle: So do you see that your brick and mortar locations, you said you have 18 of them, that they're going to remain just as strong a part of the business and potentially even open up more brick-and-mortar locations?

Jeff: Yeah, I mean our plans going forward as of now are to open a handful of stores every year. We have a running list of about 60 locations where we'd like to be, and every year, we're going to pick a handful and we're going to go open there. So, we're in a pretty intense period in our company's life right now of pretty dramatic expansion. We're growing fast and we're having a good time.

Janelle: Part and parcel to our conversation with the Internet is social media, specifically, and you have a great Facebook page. It seems like you've got a good amount of engagement going on there on a regular basis. You have a mobile app. And you've got some other social properties for your customers to stay connected with Pure Hockey. So, from the social media perspective, can you tell us a little bit about what has sort of driven your strategy with that?

Jeff: Yeah, I mean we do all of our social media in-house. Honestly, the strategy around social media is more about engagement and entertaining than it is about selling. If I had to guess about how often we post about sales and deals versus about how often post funny pictures about hockey, I would say it's probably 80/20 in favor of the latter. We're not a bunch of goofballs, but we do like to keep people entertained, and I think we do a pretty good job of it online.

It's also not just one person. We basically open up Facebook and we open up Twitter to, I want to say, it's probably 10, 10-plus people in our company have access to it and can post to it when they want to. We also have a certain number of specific Facebook pages for our stores as well, so the people in our stores are also, not all of them, but some of them, are also posting updates about what's going on at the local level at each store.

I think with social media, when you look at it from a corporate perspective, it's not something that can be done by just one person sitting in the marketing office. You know, it's sort of a shared strategy, and letting more and more people at the company be involved in it not only improves your morale in general, but it also, I think, improves your content when you've got so many different people, so many different personalities, posting different things.

Janelle: Great. Well, Jeff, it sounds like things are going really well at Pure Hockey and we're excited to have you at the Shops at the Pond. We wish the best of luck to you.

Jeff: Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.

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